

Romans 16: Was Phoebe a Deacon
09-03-17

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;
Romans 16:1

The word “deacon” comes from a transliteration of the Greek word “*diakonos*”. It is usually translated as servant, and sometimes as minister. In a few cases, it refers to a particular work (or office) of the local church, the work of a deacon.

Deacons are an important part of the structure of the New Testament church. In Acts 6, men were appointed to a work similar to that of a deacon. We see that their purpose was to keep the peace of the congregation by making sure that needs were met and the congregation functioned. Deacons are servants who make peace. Secondly, they are called by qualifications (1 Tim. 3). Third, they are always seen with elders (Phil. 1, 1 Tim. 3), although there are times that there are elders mentioned without deacons. Finally, they are always mentioned in a plurality (Phil. 1, 1 Tim. 3). This testimony of Scripture fits what the earliest writers after the New Testament described¹.

Some translations of Romans 16 speak of Phoebe as a deacon:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. (NIV)

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea. (NLT)

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, (RSV)

These translations are usually considered to be weak (not for this passage, but many others). Yet many wonder if it would be accurate to consider Phoebe as one who did the work of a deacon in the church. Is this possible?

Five reasons that Phoebe was not a deacon of a local church

1. The Greek word *Diakonos* is used in Romans several times, and in each case it is not the office of a deacon, but refers to one who is a servant (Romans 15:4, Romans 15:8).
2. Phoebe does not fit the qualifications of a deacon that are described in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. First among them is that “*Deacons likewise must be men....*” (NASB); the word deacon is an Accusative Plural Masculine noun. Additionally, deacons must be the husband of one wife, and one who is the head of their household. Phoebe could not meet these qualifications.
3. Phoebe’s visit does not fit the context of a deacon. A deacon is a work of a local church, and would not be recognized between congregations. This visit is NOT a local church work, and would not be something a deacon would do as part of their duties.
4. Phoebe does not fit the historical context of a deacon. It is not just the Scriptures which testify of the lack of qualification; early writers distinguish the work of deacons and agree too that it was a work only a man was called to perform.

¹ (1) Polycarp – Letter to the Philippians
(2) Didache

5. The real title that Paul is singling out is not deacon, but that title found in the second verse: helper of the church.

A Helper of the church

Paul wants them to receive Phoebe as a helper of the church. That word helper is more of a title than servant, although it is not a work of a local church to fill. Instead, it describes in Phoebe a character of being willing to be a benefactor of brethren, a guardian of the church, and one who cares for the needs of others.

It is this title that is the important point in the life of Phoebe, and worthy of our consideration and emulation. Are you a helper of the church? A protector of brethren and the church? A facilitator of the work of the church? A nurturer of the workers in the church? This work is not one of called qualifications, but of intent and purpose. We all can fill this work if we determine to be called. Phoebe did not hold the “office” of a deacon; Phoebe was a servant and helper of the church. We ought to see her real work and learn from it